Speaking Up

Women's Voices in Environmental Decision Making

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When it comes to interacting with the environment, women are often closest to the front line. Although both sexes may work outside of the home, women usually have additional domestic responsibilities, including food preparation, child and family health care, and, in some communities, collecting water and fuel. These responsibilities often translate into unique exposures as well as unique consciousness. In developing countries, for example, women (and children) receive greater exposure than men to indoor smoke from cooking and heating, with acute respiratory infections often resulting. In developed countries, women are often concerned about the chemicals and radiation their families may be exposed to at home, school, or the playground. Whether at home or work, women tend to bring their own gender-oriented perspective to management of the environment and natural resources where they live.

But when decisions affecting the environment are being made, women may be left out, and their needs, knowledge, and recommendations excluded; as in many other governmental and professional sectors, women are often excluded from the decision- and policy-making sphere. In recent years, however, women have made considerable strides in ensuring that their voices are heard, playing ever more prominent roles in the formulation, planning, and execution of environmental policies from the local through global levels.

A Unique Perspective

Gender can influence decisions related to the environment and natural resources, according to the February 2002 policy brief *Women, Men, and Environmental Change: The Gender Dimensions of Environmental Policies and Programs*, published by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), a Washington, D.C., data compilation group. Whereas men tend to exploit the environment and natural resources for commercial purposes, women concentrate more on the environment as it relates to household and community needs.

For example, the PRB brief describes how the men in a Thai village were given 3,000 hardwood seedlings that would eventually be used to make furniture and carvings to sell. But the women, who traditionally care for young plants, had not been told what the hardwoods were for. They prefer softwood trees for fuelwood and fodder, and so allowed the sprouts to die. Once the women were brought into the decision-making process, however, seedlings of both types were delivered, meeting the needs of both men and women.

At the same time, men and women may be impacted differently by environmental degradation, according to the PRB brief, and environmental policies that consider such gender differences are often based on social, health, and ecological research that analyzes the impact of humans on the environment and vice versa. The brief describes how women may respond differently to deforestation, water scarcity, soil degradation, and exposure to agricultural and industrial chemicals and organic pollutants. For example, pesticide exposure can lead to a high incidence of birth defects and perinatal deaths. In the Limbang district of Malaysia, commercial and domestic logging by men has contributed to degrading forest regions, making it more difficult for women to collect wild herbs, fruits, and natural medicines. Deforestation in Sudan in the past 10 years has quadrupled the time women must spend gathering fuelwood. Desertification in sub-Saharan countries also means women spend more time searching for water. And women also tend to spend more time indoors, which exposes them to soot from burning biomass fuels such as wood and charcoal—rates of chronic lung disease among such women can be high [see "The Quest for Fire: Hazards of a Daily Struggle," p. A28 this issue].

"Over the past three decades, as women have progressively entered the workplace and taken prominent positions in government and industry, they have also become increasingly active in environmental decision-making structures at all levels," says Sascha Gabizon, international director for Women in Europe for a Common Future, an international network of women focused on stimulating cooperation among European government and nongovernmental organizations on environmental, health, and sustainable development issues. "Many of their concerns remain oriented toward local populations, including families and neighborhood communities. They may be the first to become aware of a pollution problem, noticing, for example, that an unusually high number of local schoolchildren are coming down with a serious illness. They may then discover that the school was built on a toxic waste dump and press for significant change."

One notable U.S. example of women's approach to environmental change is that of Love Canal, a former chemical landfill converted into a neighborhood in northern New York State in 1953. Residents were never warned that their homes and schools were built over a toxic dump, but over the years they made numerous official complaints of odors and unidentified substances surfacing in their yards. Little was done until finally, in 1978, a local mother organized a petition to close her son's kindergarten after a report confirmed that a public health hazard existed in Love Canal. This move and other protests eventually propelled the U.S. government to declare the Love Canal community a federal emergency, and most of the residents were eventually relocated. Later studies would confirm that families there also suffered high rates of cancer, birth defects, and miscarriages.

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–Sascha Gabizon
Women in Europe for a Common Future

At the same time, women are gradually filling highly influential positions related to natural resource use and environmental protection on a national and multinational level. To date, 35 of the world's environment ministers in developed and developing countries are women. The European Union's environment commission also is led by a woman—Margot Wallström—who, according to Gabizon, continually advocates that gender issues be considered in environmental policies. Wallstrom is widely recognized for strengthening environmental policies in Europe and introducing environmental considerations into other policies. Women also head up many international and nongovernmental organizations related to the environment and natural resources. "While their ability to influence environmental policies differs from region to region, [women] generally lobby for the right to a healthy planet and a healthy workplace," says Gabizon. "Fortunately, they're finding more and more opportunities to voice their concerns."

"One of the more important moments in women's growing involvement in environmental decision-making processes goes back to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio," says Martha Chouchena-Rojas, head of policy, biodiversity, and international agreements at IUCN–the World Conservation Union, a Swiss-based global union of governments, agencies, and nongovernmental organizations dedicated to conserving biological diversity worldwide. "For the first time, women were recognized as one of the major groups that need to be involved in managing and conserving natural resources and, more broadly, in achieving sustainable development." Chouchena-Rojas says this was the result of the work of many women's organizations that had lobbied heavily for this recognition. Women's importance was emphasized again at the 2002 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, she adds. "As a result, women's participation in environmental policy–related processes should grow even more in the coming years."

A group of top women environmental leaders presented a series of environment-related observations at the Johannesburg summit. The women proposed that environmental protection be linked to alleviating poverty, controlling population growth, improving the position of women, and encouraging sustainable development—that all are interrelated and must be addressed if environmental actions are to be effective. They stressed the importance of boosting women's involvement in the development of equitable and sustainable solutions to environmental problems.

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), held in Beijing in 1995, also had recommended strengthening women's participation and leadership in sound environmental management. Delegates there stated that bringing women into the decision-making process is key to the effectiveness and sustainability of environmental policies—without their perspective, policies may be less likely to succeed. The conference issued a platform for action, "Women and the Environment Diagnosis," that called for governments to ensure opportunities for women to participate in environmental decision making at all levels and integrate women's perspectives into all environmental management decisions.

A five-year review of the FWCW in 2000 found, however, that although significant progress had been made in carrying out the 1995 platform, major obstacles remain to achieving greater opportunities for women in the environment and other sectors. According to the PRB brief, women continue, for example, to be "poorly represented in governments and decision-making bodies. This lack of representation limits women's influence over public policies and programs. Women need official channels to reflect their needs and to have a voice in environmental policy decisions."

Speaking Out

Women's contributions to environmental management have often taken place through grassroots and youth campaigns at the local level, where decentralized action on environmental issues is most needed and decisive, according to the FWCW platform. Women in Ukraine, Bangladesh, Russia, and Mexico, for example, have been involved in planning the management of freshwater resources, coming together in groups and cooperatives to highlight urgent problems in local industrial areas, and to help conserve and protect clean water supplies.

After the deadly 1986 explosion at Ukraine's Chernobyl nuclear plant, which released significant amounts of radiation into the environment, mothers in surrounding communities created MAMA-86, a nongovernmental organization with a focus on ensuring access to clean drinking water. MAMA-86 chapters quickly proliferated throughout the former Soviet Union. In Russia, the Odessa branch of MAMA-86 successfully stopped a plant that cleaned oil tankers from discharging polluted effluent into local waterways, in part by mounting a campaign against the city mayor, who had opposed the group's efforts to stop the discharge. The group eventually succeeded in having the plant repaired and the pollution stopped, according to Gabizon. "MAMA-86 became very good at affecting local policies," she says, "and that success has led to their speaking out on many other environmental issues in the Odessa area."

In Kenya, Masai women have joined a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) initiative to reduce the time spent finding and collecting clean water supplies, according to a 27 September 2002 UNEP announcement. The women had expressed their frustration at losing valuable time in the search, which had more than doubled in East Africa over the past three decades due to dwindling supplies. Many women were walking up to 10 kilometers a day to bring back enough water for their families. In response, the UNEP project enables local women to harvest rainwater virtually at their doorsteps with the use of specially designed low-cost containers and the digging of nearby mini-reservoirs, or "earth pans." The project has just begun in Kenya,

and similar projects are under way in Nepal, India, and Bhutan.

In Brazzaville, Congo, a city of 2 million people, women are responsible for the disposal of domestic waste. "Women were made responsible for the waste because they were the caregivers and stayed home," says Doris Mpoumou, a gender and governance program associate at the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), a New York City–based international advocacy network that seeks to increase women's influence worldwide. Municipal authorities had not provided them with official disposal sites, however, and the accumulated waste was becoming an environmental health hazard.

Mpoumou, who grew up in Brazzaville, remembers her mother "struggling with domestic waste, which was unhealthy, of course, to keep in the house or dispose of near residential communities. She and other neighborhood women attended meetings on the issue, but the local men refused to include them in discussions about how to deal with it." Finally, in the late 1970s, the women went directly to the mayor, who selected a disposal site near the market. The women felt this was not a good solution, either, because the smell was offensive, and shoppers might be put off by the suggestion of negative health effects. "Finally, after more negotiations, an appropriate place was created," says Mpoumou. "Even on a neighborhood scale, it's clear that women's impact on environmental decisions can be tremendous. Once women were given the floor, a solution was found."

In the United Kingdom, the London-based Women's Environmental Network (WEN) also lobbies for environmental change by using a grassroots approach. Two recent environmental issues affecting women have concerned diapers and sanitary protection. "We use a women-centric approach that often focuses on prevention," says Ann Link, a coordinator for WEN. "You won't have to clean up the problem if you don't create it in the first place. So we try to get local authorities to promote alternatives." The group encourages hospitals to use cloth rather than disposable diapers. They also led a campaign against using chlorine in manufacturing sanitary protection; as a result, the use of bleach has gone down significantly. "We . . . talked about the pressures put on women to buy sanitary protection," says Link. "Our focus was to bring the issue into the mainstream. We feel that an effective way to change policies is to reach women through the things they buy and use in the marketplace."

Public participation in environmental management is increasingly seen as a vital component of environmental policies, according to the PRB brief, which argues that women's involvement in the formulation, planning, and execution of environmental policy remains low at all levels. The brief does report, however, that governments in Mexico and Central America have pledged to incorporate gender considerations into their environmental policies at the national level. El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Mexico, in particular, have created "gender units" within their environmental ministries to monitor and evaluate gender-sensitive programming.

Official channels can provide women with a voice in environmental policy decisions. For example, some countries, including India, Uganda, Brazil, and the Philippines, have set aside political seats for women to ensure their participation, according to the PRB brief. In Jamaica, women now make up more than one-third of the Forestry Department's technical staff. In Tunisia, women hold 19% of senior management positions in the Ministry of Environment and Land Use Planning. Uganda's 1995 National Environment Plan supports women's participation in environmental planning. The Malawi National Environmental Policy calls for integration of gender-specific concerns into environmental planning and decision making at all levels. And in the Philippines, gender considerations also play a greater role in environmental planning and programming. A gender and development "focal point" was set up in that country's Division of Environment and Natural Resources to serve as a catalyst for gender-responsive planning and programming.

The FWCW platform further argues that women "too often remain marginalized in policy-making and decision-making bodies," and suggests that a lack of appropriate education and training may be at least partly responsible. At the same time, the platform recognizes that women do take the lead in promoting an environmental ethic, reducing resource use, and reusing and recycling resources to minimize waste and excessive consumption. Women, especially indigenous women, can have particular knowledge of ecological linkages and fragile ecosystem management, information that can be crucial when formulating effective environmental policies. "Women use this knowledge in managing local resources, but importantly, this knowledge can also be used for the development of pharmaceutical and other products with commercial value," says Chouchena-Rojas. "It is thus essential to develop the necessary mechanisms to protect this knowledge and to ensure that the benefits derived from its use are fairly shared with the owner of such knowledge and resources."

Next Steps

Women are increasingly making their voices heard from the local through global levels, though their level of influence can vary significantly from region to region; they may join a grassroots organization or be appointed as a national environment minister. "One of the most effective approaches is to lobby local governments to take measures," says Mpoumou, "and to sensitize local residents to the environmental issues they face."

An important step for women is to build on the momentum of the United Nations conferences to translate international commitments into concrete action. The various conference platforms represent common policy statements among the nations participating in the process. Such conference agreements can be a catalyst for national action, according to the PRB brief. Women policy advocates can use the documents to pressure governments to fund or approve actions that support their position.

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–Women, Men, and Environmental Change
Population Reference Bureau policy brief

"But not all women are working on the same side of the debate," says Chouchena-Rojas. "Just because we're all women doesn't mean that we're all in agreement on the issues and how to resolve them." Gabizon concurs. "Women don't always vote for women," she says. "And they don't always bring a female-oriented perspective to their role as decision makers. Being a woman isn't always enough. But it's a start."

That start has led to numerous initiatives to bring women into the environmental decision-making process. With their multiple responsibilities within the community and the home, their perspective can play a vital role in making choices related to the environment and the use of natural resources. As evidenced by the increasing inclusion of gender perspectives in environmental policies at all levels, women clearly are making their voices heard.

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